

HR

WSD Personnel
Washington State
Employee
Assistance
Program

FrontLine Supervisor

Olympia 360.753.3260

A newsletter from the Employee Assistance Program

Seattle 206.281.6315

Spokane 509.482.3686

Toll Free 877.313.4455

October 2008

<http://www.dop.wa.gov/eap>

■ **My employee is recuperating at home after an on-the-job injury, and I hear that he is drinking heavily. I've always been under the impression that this employee doesn't drink. I'm worried about the effect it could have on his returning to work? Can I make a referral to the EAP?**

Rumors about your employee's behavior at home aren't enough to substantiate a supervisor referral to the EAP because they do not pertain to performance or behavior on the job. If your employee phones to discuss work-related issues, ask how he is feeling and recovering from the injury. Expressions of support facilitate injured employees returning to work more quickly. Let the employee know you look forward to his return. If you hear expressions of frustration with being absent from work, encourage self-referral to the EAP for support. It might lead to an assessment. If he is drinking heavily now, it is possible the drinking pattern will continue upon return to work, especially if this is the relapse of a recovering person. If so, you may notice a pattern of performance decline that didn't exist prior to the injury. Injury and illness are known relapse triggers for recovering persons. Don't diagnose or make assumptions. Simply focus on performance and consult with the EAP on how to proceed.

■ **An employee appearing under the influence at work was tested in accordance with our agency's Drug Free Workplace Policy. Her supervisor then announced to a group of people in the hallway that she was drunk and had been sent home. Is this proper?**

Although the employee appeared intoxicated to those nearby, a manager's declaration that an employee is drunk is improper and violates confidentiality and privacy provisions associated with drug testing procedures. Although an employee who tests positive at work should not be at work, an anxious and curious group of coworkers in a hallway should be met with a statement of assurance such as, "The matter at hand is being managed properly in accordance with agency policy." Nothing more needs to be said. Managers' actions and words model how matters of this type are handled. The supervisor's behavior in this case is neither likely to send a message that dignifies the medical condition of a potentially alcoholic employee, nor reduce stigma associated with addictive disease.

■ **Supervisors are told they are not supposed to make conclusions or analyze their employees' personal problems when**

To wonder what is causing the decline in an employee's performance is natural. It's what happens next that can interfere with an employee improving performance or getting help for a personal problem if one exists. Supervisors may test a theory or belief concerning the nature of an employee's problem by making a simple inquiry such as, "How are

performance issues exist. Doesn't this go against human nature? I always have an idea about what's contributing to an employee's performance problems.

things going at home, Ralph—not so good, perhaps?” An inquiry of this nature puts the employee squarely in control of the dialogue with the supervisor, the outcome of the discussion, and usually whether an EAP referral will follow. In matters concerning performance issues, the employee—along with his supervisor, family members, and coworkers—may be *unaware* a personal problem exists. An EAP assessment often reveals a personal issue may be a contributing factor to job performance problems. The EA Professional will make suggestions and referrals that help an employee deal with underlying personal problems so that job performance improves.

■ **My employee doesn't trust anyone. He probably won't open up with the EAP. How do EAPs work with employees like this? I am sure the belief that some employees won't "open up" with the EAP plays a role in some supervisors' reluctance to refer them.**

Do not presume an employee you know well, who appears to be closed and unwilling to warm up to others, won't be willing to do so with the EAP. The EAP interview may be a place where your employee feels safe enough to disclose his personal story. EA professionals are specially trained and experienced at establishing trust with their clients. They are able to put clients at ease and determine how slowly or quickly an employee will begin to share personal information. EA professionals listen empathically and ask questions without making judgments and are also sensitive about when certain questions should not be asked. They know where to start asking questions in order to help an employee feel safe and willing to discuss important issues. The EA Professional's goal is to assist an employee to receive the help and referrals necessary so that job performance improvements can be made.

■ **I had an employee get angry with me and say, "Someday, man, I'm going to take you out." I confronted the employee to get an explanation about what "out" meant. Nothing more was said. I was nervous, but should I have done more? Is an EAP referral appropriate?**

It sounds like you interpreted this expression as a threat to commit a violent act against you. This outweighs seeking clarification and deliberating over semantics to determine what was actually meant. In addition to taking steps to protect yourself when you feel threatened, immediately document the incident, and discuss the matter with your supervisor, human resources and your EAP. The WA State EAP recently published the *Addressing Violence in the Workplace Guide*. It can be accessed on the EAP website at www.dop.wa.gov/EAP or you may call the EAP to request a copy in booklet format. This guide has been created to provide an overview of workplace violence. The guide provides assistance for documenting behaviors of concern, actions to take and a sample "Threat Incident Report." It contains a useful list of Behavior Red Flags to help you determine if what you are experiencing is a threat. Threats of violence such as you described must be taken seriously. Always err on the side of caution.

NOTES